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Death on a Friday Afternoon

Meditations on the Last Words of Jesus from the Cross

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Coming to Our Senses

The First Word from the cross:

"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Perhaps you are reading this in the summertime, or in autumn, or in the dead of winter. It makes no difference. I do not ask you to forget the present and imagine that it is Holy Week. Rather, I invite you to be open to the thought that this time that you are now calling the present *is* Holy Week, for all time was there, *is* there, at the cross.

Christians call them the Triduum Sacrum, the three most sacred days of the year, the three most sacred days of all time when time is truly told. The first, Maundy Thursday, is so called because that night, the night before he was betrayed, Jesus gave the command, the *mandatum*, that we should love one another. Not necessarily with the love of our desiring, but with a demanding love, even a demeaning love—as in washing the feet of faithless friends who will run away and leave you naked to your enemies.

The second day is the Friday we so oddly call "good." And the third day, the great Vigil of Resurrection conquest. Do not rush to the conquest. Stay a while with this day. Let your heart be broken by the unspeakably bad of this Friday we call good. Some scholars speculate that "Good Friday" comes from "God's Friday," as "good-bye" was originally "God be by you." But it is just as odd that it should be called God's Friday, when it is the day we say good-bye to the glory of God. Wherever its name comes from, let your present moment stay with this day. Stay a while in the eclipse of the light, stay a while with the conquered One. There is time enough for Easter.

By these three days all the world is called to attention. Everything that is and ever was and ever will be, the macro and the micro, the galaxies beyond number and the microbes beyond notice—everything is mysteriously entangled with what happened, with what happens, in these days. This is the *axis mundi*, the center upon which the cosmos turns. In the derelict who cries from the cross is, or so Christians say, the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. The life of all on this day died. Stay a while with that dying.

Every human life, conceived from eternity and destined to eternity, here finds its story truly told. In this killing that some call senseless we are brought to our senses. Here we find out who we most truly are, because here is the One who is what we are called to be. The derelict cries, "Come, follow me." Follow him there? We recoil. We close our ears. We hurry on to Easter. But we will not know what to do with Easter's light if we shun the friendship of the darkness that is wisdom's way to light.

In Good Friday's service of the Seven Words, alongside this

First Word from the cross, we read the parable of the prodigal son, the wayward son, the wastrel son. It is all there in the fifteenth chapter of Luke's Gospel. Determined to reach for the stars, to seize the light, to shatter the restraints of life, he went to his father and asked for all he could get. The father, with deep foreboding and a breaking heart, gave him what he asked for. So lightly, so eagerly did impetuous youth leave the love that gave him life. He rushed to the light.

And so the prodigal son went off to what we are told was a distant country. There he wasted his money, he wasted his energies, he wasted his youth. With what he had and with what he was he bought friends and pleasure, until he had no more and was no more what he had been. Destitute, he was reduced to feeding the pigs and envying the pigs for the slop they ate. And then, in the eclipse of the light, we encounter those abruptly wondrous words in the Gospel account: "He came to his senses." Other translations say, "he came to himself." I will return to that later—how we come to know our true selves when we are encountered by an "other" who defines who we are. But, for the moment, we stay with the simple telling of the tale.

He came to his senses. "What am I doing, what have I done, with my life?" From this madness, from the darkness of delusion, we are told that he turned his face homeward, homeward to the waiting father. The father saw him coming from afar. He was way off down the road, not even near the house yet. I suspect the father had been going out every day, month after month, maybe year after year, waiting for his son—this son so filled with promise, this son so filled with light—to return to the love that gave him life. Day after day, the father had slowly turned

back to the house disappointed. This day he had gone out once again, hoping against hope, expecting against expectation, and this day, there in the distance, there just over the horizon—his son.

He saw him far off, coming home, coming home to the waiting father. Quickly—the fatted calf, the finest robe and shoes, the ring of fidelity! And the father forgave him everything, even the calculated confession by which he would win his father's favor. Of the son it is said, "He came to his senses," and coming to his senses he came to his father.

Good Friday brings us to our senses. Our senses come to us as we sense that in this life and in this death is our life and our death. The truth about the crucified Lord is the truth about ourselves. "Know yourself," the ancient philosophers admonish us, for in knowing yourself is the beginning of wisdom. To which the Psalmist declares, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." The beginning of wisdom is to come to our senses and know the fearful truth about ourselves, that we have wandered and wasted our days in a distant country far from home. We know ourselves most truly in knowing Christ, for in him is our true self. Or so Christians say. His cross is the way home to the waiting Father. "If you would come to your senses," he says, "come, follow me."

The ancient Christian fathers spoke of the Christ event as the "recapitulation" of the entire human drama. In this one life, all lives are summed up; in the eternal present of this one life, the past is encompassed, the future is anticipated and the life of Everyman and Everywoman is most truly lived. "I am the way, the truth, and the life," he said. Not a way among other ways,

not a truth among other truths, not a life among other lives, but the way of all ways, the truth of all truths and the life of all lives. Recapitulation. It means, quite simply and solemnly, that this is your life, this is my life and we have not come to our senses until we sense ourselves in the life, and death, of Christ. This is the *axis mundi.*

"When I came to you," writes St. Paul to the Corinthians, "I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." Stay a while. Do not hurry by the cross on your way to Easter joy, for we know the risen Lord only through Christ and him crucified. The philosopher Alfred North Whitehead said that the only simplicity to be trusted is the simplicity to be found on the far side of complexity. The only joy to be trusted is the joy on the far side of a broken heart; the only life to be trusted is the life on the far side of death. Stay a while, with Christ and him crucified.

We contemplate for a time the meaning of Good Friday, and then return to what is called the real world of work and shopping and commuter trains and homes. As we come out of a movie theater and shake our heads to clear our minds of another world where we lived for a time in suspended disbelief, as we reorient ourselves to reality, so we leave our contemplation—we leave the church building, we close the book—where for a time another reality seemed possible, believable, even real. But, we tell ourselves, the real world is a world elsewhere. It is the world of deadlines to be met, of appointments to be kept, of taxes to be paid, of children to be educated. From here, from this

moment at the cross, it is a distant country. "Father, forgive them, for they have forgotten the way home. They have misplaced the real world." Here, here at the cross, is the real world, here is the *axis mundi.*

Not long ago I was invited to lecture to a large group of clergy in the Midwest. They had for two days been studying sacramental and liturgical theology, and it came time for the bishop to introduce me. "It has been a rewarding two days," he said, "as we have been thinking about worship and the sacramental life, but now we have Father Neuhaus to return us to the real world as he addresses the subject of the Church and social responsibility."

Really? The real world? What then is that other world of worship, prayer and contemplative exploration into the mystery of Christ's presence, a presence ever elusive and disturbingly near? On the part of the bishop it was perhaps a slip of the tongue, but behind slips of the tongue are slips of the mind and sometimes slips of the soul. It happens among all Christians today, of whatever denomination or persuasion, that there is a great slippage of the soul. It is by this world, this world at the cross, that reality is measured and judged. That other world, the world we call real, is a distant country until we with Christ bring it home to the waiting Father.

We are bringing it home, dragging it all behind us: the deadlines and the duties, the fears of failure and hopes for advancement, the loves unreturned, the plans disappointed, the children we lose, the marriage we cannot mend. And so we come loping along with reality's baggage, returning to the real—the real that we left behind when we left for what we mistook as

the real world. "I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'" I am no longer worthy to be called your son. I am no longer worthy to be called your daughter. And Christ our elder brother takes the baggage and hoists it upon his shoulders, adding this to all that on the cross he is bearing and bringing home. "Father, forgive them, for they knew not what they were doing."

"Come to me," he had earlier said, "all you who are weary and heavy burdened, and I will give you rest." Bring me your baggage.

"Father, forgive them." For whom does he pray forgiveness? For the leaders of his own people, a fragile, frightened establishment that could not abide the threat of the presence of a love so long delayed. For pitiable Pilate, forever wringing his hands forever soiled. For the soldiers who did the deed, who wielded the whip, who drove the nails, who thrust the spear, it all being but a day's work on foreign assignment, far from home. And for us he asks forgiveness, for we were there.

On the Sunday that begins Holy Week we read the passion story and come to the part where the crowd shouts, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" That part is read by the entire congregation, for we were there. The old spiritual asks, "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" Yes, we answer. Yes, we were there when *we* crucified our Lord.

Over the centuries theologians have contrived wondrously refined theories of the atonement: Why it is that this One had to die, why it is that his dying is for us death's death, why it is that his open tomb opens for every last child of earth the door

to tomorrows without end. And all the theories of atonement are but probings into mystery, the mystery of a love that did not have to be but was, and is. All the theories are intellectual variations, imaginative riffs, on the assertion of St. Paul that "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation." As the prodigal son was reconciled to his father, but infinitely more so.

"Not counting their trespasses." Accountants reconcile the books, and there is no doubt that the disordered books of our lives need reconciling. But the books are disordered by our disordered lives, and our lostness cannot be remedied by the accountant's craft. Someone must go to the distant country where we have strayed, as a good shepherd seeks a sheep that is lost. Someone must go, but not just anyone. If we are to be brought home, it has to be one who is, in the words of the Nicene Creed, "God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God."

Only he can bring us home who comes from home, who comes from God. Coming from the very heart of God, he is God. And so we say that God became man. It is the longest journey, long beyond our ability to imagine. God became man. We say it trembling, we say it puzzling, but more often we say it rotely, counting on routine to buffer what we cannot bear. What can we do with the burden of such a truth? This is the awful truth: that we made necessary the baby crying in the cradle to become the derelict crying from the cross. The awful truth—as in awe-filled, filled with awe.

"Atonement." It is a fine, solid, twelfth-century Middle English word, the kind of word one is inclined to trust. Think of

at-one-ment: What was separated is now at one. But after such a separation there can be no easy reunion. Reconciliation must do justice to what went wrong. It will not do to merely overlook the wrong. We could not bear to live in a world where wrong is taken lightly, where right and wrong finally make no difference. In such a world, we—what we do and what we are—would make no difference. Spare me a gospel of easy love that makes of my life a thing without consequence.

Again, St. Paul says God was in Christ "not counting their trespasses against them." Atonement is not an accountant's trick. It is not a kindly overlooking; it is not a not counting of what must count if anything in heaven or on earth is to matter. God could not simply decide not to count without declaring that we do not count.

But someone might say that, if God is God, he could do anything. Very well, then, God *would* not decide not to count, because he would not declare that we do not count. And yet God's "would" implicates and limits his "could." The God of whom we speak is not, in the words of Pascal, the God of the philosophers but the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He is the God of unbounded freedom who willed to be bound by love. God is what he wills to be and wills to be what he is. St. John tells us, "God is love," and love always binds. In the seminars of philosophical speculation, many gods are possible. In the arena of salvation's story, God is the God who is bound to love.

He does not count our trespasses against us because something has been done about them. He reckons us sinners to be righteous because sins have been set to right. Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker movement among the poor, spoke of a "harsh and dreadful love." It is the love of Christ's

cross borne for us, and of the cross he calls us to bear. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Lutheran pastor and martyr under the tyranny of the Third Reich, wrote against and lived against the "cheap grace" that devalues sin and forgiveness alike. Cheap grace is easy grace. Cheap grace does not reckon what went wrong; it requires no costly love.

We confess to hurting someone we love and she says, "Forget it. It's nothing. It doesn't matter." But she knows and we know that it is not nothing, it does matter and we will not forget it. Forgive and forget, they say, but that is surely wrong. What is forgotten need not, indeed cannot, be forgiven. Love does not say to the beloved that it does not matter, for the beloved matters. Spare me the sentimental love that tells me what I do and what I am does not matter.

Forgiveness costs. Forgiveness costs dearly. Some theories of atonement say that Christ paid the price. His death appeased God's wrath and satisfied God's justice. That way of putting it appeals to biblical witness and venerable tradition, and no doubt contains great truth. Yet for many in the past and at present that way of speaking poses great problems. The subtlety of the theory is overwhelmed by the cartoon picture of an angry Father who demands the death of his Son, maybe even kills his Son, in order to appease his own wrath. In its vulgar form—which means the form most common—it is a matter of settling scores, a drama vengeful and vindictive, more worthy of *The Godfather* than of the Father of whom it is said, "God is love."

And yet forgiveness costs. Forgiveness is not forgetfulness; not counting their trespasses is not a kindly accountant winking at what is wrong; it is not a benign cooking of the books. In the

world, in our own lives, something has gone dreadfully wrong, and it must be set right. Recall when you were a little child and somebody—maybe you—did something very bad. Maybe a lie was told, some money was stolen or the cookie jar lay shattered on the kitchen floor. The bad thing has been found out, and now something must happen, something must be done about it. The fear of punishment is terrible, but not as terrible as the thought that nothing will happen, that bad things don't matter. If bad things don't matter, then good things don't matter, and then nothing matters and the meaning of everything lies shattered like the cookie jar on the kitchen floor.

Trust that child's intuition. "Unless you become as little children," Jesus said, "you cannot enter the kingdom of God." Unless we are stripped of our habits of forgetting, of our skillful making of excuses, of our jaded acceptance of a world in which bad things happen and it doesn't matter.

This, then, is our circumstance. Something has gone dreadfully wrong with the world, and with us in the world. Things are out of whack. It is not all our fault, but it is our fault too. We cannot blame our distant parents for that fateful afternoon in the garden, for we were there. We, too, reached for the forbidden fruit—the forbidden fruit by which we not only know good and evil, but, much more fatefully, presume to name good and evil. For most of us, our rebellion did not have about it the gargantuan defiance depicted in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Most of us did not, as some do, stand on a mountain peak and shake a clenched fist against the storming skies, cursing God.

But, then, neither were Adam or Eve so melodramatic. On a perfectly pleasant afternoon in paradise, they did no more than

listen to an ever so reasonable voice. "Did God really mean that? Surely he wants you to be yourself, to decide for yourself. Would he have made something so very attractive only to forbid it? The truth is he wants you to be like him, to be like gods." The fatal step was not in knowing the difference between good and evil. Before what we call "the fall" they knew the good in the fullest way of knowing, which is to say that they did the good, they lived the good. They knew the good honestly, straightforwardly, simply, uncomplicatedly, without shame.

Some thinkers have argued that "the fall" was really a fall up rather than a fall down. By the fall our first parents were raised, it is said, to a higher level of consciousness in the knowing of good and evil. Now they know no longer simply and directly, but reflexively; now they know in the consciousness of knowing. This, however, is but another conceit of our fallen nature. It is as though a paraplegic, marvelously skilled in the complex maneuvering of a wheelchair, were to despise the healthy as belonging to a lower order because they walk simply, in blithe ignorance of the complexity of movement that the paraplegic knows so well. The conceit is that our complicated way of knowing is superior because it is ours.

What we call our higher level of consciousness is but an instance of our calling evil good, of our priding ourselves on the consequence of the catastrophe that is our fall from the knowledge of the good. True knowledge of the good is a way of knowing that is, in the words of Jesus, loving the Lord our God with all our heart and all our soul and all our mind. The reflexive mind, the divided soul, the conflicted heart—these many take to be the marks of maturity and growth. To know the good simply,

to love the good and do the good because it is self-evidently to be loved and to be done—that is taken to be the mark of those whom we condescendingly call simple. So it is that sin's injury is declared a benefit, our weakness a strength, and the fall of that dread afternoon a fall up rather than down. Of those who thus confound good and evil, St. Paul says "they glory in their shame."

If good would have come from eating of the Tree of Knowledge, God would not have forbidden it. Nor, contrary to popular myth, is the fatal knowledge the knowledge of sexuality, although God knows how large is the part of sexuality in our glorying in our shame. Yet the fall was not a fall into sexuality. Adam and Eve were created as sexual beings, and the Genesis account leaves no doubt that from the beginning they knew what this meant. "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed."

The shame came later, when they reached, when they overreached, for a different kind of knowledge. The Hebrew verb "to know," *yada*, is rich in meanings. In connection with what we call the fall, to know good and evil is to reach for a universal knowledge, to be unbounded by truth as it is presented to us, to aspire to create our own truth. I say we were there in the garden when humanity aspired to "be like gods" by knowing good and evil, by reaching to know the power to define what is good and what is evil.

This page of Genesis is rewritten every day in the living out of the human story. Each of us has been there when we, godlike, decided that we would determine what is good and what is

evil—at least for our own lives. Perhaps we shied away from the godlike pretension of making a universal rule that applies to all. Modestly—or so we said—we limited ourselves to deciding "what is good for me" and "what is wrong for me." "I can speak only for myself," we say. We would not think of "imposing" our judgment upon others. Under the cover of modesty, we deny the truth about the good and the evil that does not require our permission to be true. Thus we would evade the truth of good and evil that brings us to judgment. The truth is that we do not judge the truth; the truth judges us.

"And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden." It was the cool of the day, toward evening, when the light was going out. "Where are you, Adam?" And Adam said, "I heard the sound of thee in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself." And the Lord God said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?"

And so the questions come at us. Who told us we are naked? Who so complexified our existence? From where did we get this reflexive knowledge so that we no longer simply know, but know only our act of knowing? How did it happen that the simplicity of loving is now displaced by unending complexity over the meanings of love? And why are we ashamed of our nakedness, a nakedness that was once the sign of immediacy to the beloved but is now a sign of innocence lost, of ludicrous vulnerability in the face of our pretension to be our own god, a sign of our sad ending up as our own best beloved? Where are

you, my prodigal son Adam? Into what distant country have you gone?

The questions come at each of us. Were you there when they reached for an alien knowledge, turned away from the light and hid themselves in shame? Of course we were there. Not once, but many times we have been there, hiding from the voice of the waiting Father who calls in the night, "Where are you?"

The First Word from the cross: "Father, forgive them." Forgiveness costs. Whatever the theory of atonement, this is at the heart of it, that forgiveness costs. Any understanding of what makes at-one-ment possible includes a few simple truths. First, like the child, we know that something very bad has happened. Something has gone very wrong with us and with the world of which we are part. The world is not and we are not what we know was meant to be. That is the most indubitable of truths; it is beyond dispute, it weighs with self-evident force upon every mind and heart that have not lost the sensibility that makes us human.

The something very bad that has happened takes the form of the long, dreary list of history's horribles, from concentration camps to the tortured deaths of innocent children. And it takes the everyday forms of the habits of compromise, of loves betrayed, of lies excused, of dreams deferred until they die. The indubitable truth is illustrated in ways beyond number, from Auschwitz to the shattered cookie jar on the kitchen floor. Something very bad has happened.

Second—and here I simplify outrageously, but our purpose is to cut through to the heart of the matter—we are complicit in what has gone so terribly wrong. We have problems with that.

World-class criminals, murderers and drug traffickers, if they know what they have done, may have no trouble with that, but for many of us it may be a bit hard to swallow. I mean, we haven't done anything *that* bad, have we? Surely nothing so bad as to make *us* responsible for the death of God on the cross . . . True, the writer of 1 Timothy called himself "the chief of sinners," and St. Paul did do some nasty things to the Christians in his earlier life as Saul of Tarsus. But then it would seem that he made up for it with an exemplary, indeed saintly, life. Chief of sinners? There would seem to be an element of pious hyperbole there, perhaps even an unseemly boastfulness, a reverse pride, so to speak.

It is difficult to face up to our complicity because the confession of sins does not come easy. It is also difficult because we do not want to compound our complicity by claiming sins that are not ours. We rightly recoil from those who seem to wallow in guilt. The story is told of the rabbi and cantor who, on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, lament their sins at great length, each concluding that he is a nobody. Then the sexton, inspired by their example, laments his sins and declares that he, too, is a nobody. "Nuh," says the rabbi to the cantor. "Who is he to be a nobody?"

Contemporary sensibilities are offended by what is dismissively termed "guilt tripping." Some while ago I was on the same lecture platform with a famous television evangelist from California who is noted for accenting the positive and upbeat in the Christian message. According to this evangelist, it is as with Coca-Cola: Everything goes better with Jesus. He had built a huge new church called, let us say, New Life Cathedral, and he

explained that during the course of the building there was a debate about whether the cathedral should feature a cross. It was thought that the cross might prompt negative thoughts, maybe even thoughts about suffering and death. "Finally, I said that of course there will be a cross," the famous evangelist said. "After all, the cross is the symbol of Christianity and we are a Christian church. But I can guarantee you," he declared with a triumphant smile, "there is nothing downbeat about the cross at New Life Cathedral!"

St. Paul said the cross is "foolishness to the Greeks" and a "stumbling block to the Jews" and seemed to think it would always be that way. Little did he know what gospel salesmanship would one day achieve. In the eighteenth century, Isaac Watts wrote the hymn words: "Alas! and did my Savior bleed, / And did my Sovereign die? / Would He devote that sacred head / For such a worm as I?" A worm? Really now. . . . A contemporary hymnal puts it this way: "Would he devote that sacred head / For sinners such as I?" Surely "sinners" is bad enough. Similarly with the much beloved "Amazing Grace." "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound / That saved a wretch like me." "Wretch" will never do. That is cleaned up in a contemporary version: "That loved a soul like me."

Examples can be multiplied many times over. Groveling is out, self-esteem is in. And if self-esteem seems not quite the right note for Good Friday, at least our complicity can be understood as limited liability. Very limited. Perhaps the changes in Christian thought are not all bad. There have been in Christian devotion excesses of self-accusation, of "scrupulosity," as it used to be called. Wallowing in guilt and penitential

grandstanding are justly criticized. And yet . . . we cannot just take the scissors to all those Bible passages that say he died for us and because of us, that they were our sins he bore upon the cross. Yes, Christianity is about resurrection joy, but do not rush to Easter. Good Friday makes inescapable the question of complicity.

I may think it modesty when I draw back from declaring myself chief of sinners, but it is more likely a failure of imagination. For what sinner should I speak if not for myself? Of all the billions of people who have lived and of all the thousands whom I have known, whom should I say is the chief of sinners? Surely I am authorized, surely I am competent to speak only for myself? When in the presence of God the subject of sin is raised, how can I help but say that chiefly it is I? Not to confess that I am chiefly the one is not to confess at all. It is the evasion of Adam, who said, "It was the woman whom you gave to be with me." It is the evasion of Eve, who said, "The serpent beguiled me." It is not to confess at all, and by our making of excuses is our complicity compounded.

"Forgive them, for they know not what they do." But now, like the prodigal son, we have come to our senses. Our lives are measured not by the lives of others, not by our own ideals, not by what we think might reasonably be expected of us, although by each of those measures we acknowledge failings enough. Our lives are measured by who we are created and called to be, and the measuring is done by the One who creates and calls. Finally, the judgment that matters is not ours. The judgment that matters is the judgment of God, who alone judges justly. In the cross we see the rendering of the verdict on the gravity of our sin.

We have come to our senses. None of our sins are small or of little account. To belittle our sins is to belittle ourselves, to belittle who it is that God creates and calls us to be. To belittle our sins is to belittle their forgiveness, to belittle the love of the Father who welcomes us home.

From the same Latin root come "complicity" and "complexity." Only the dulling of moral imagination prevents us from seeing how we are implicated in the complex web of human evil. The late Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel was fond of saying, "Some are guilty, all are responsible." We rightly condemn the great moral monsters of history—the Hitlers and Stalins and Maos and lesser mass murderers. Justice requires the gradation of guilt. Distinctions are in order. In important ways, we are not like them, and they are not like us. Yet complicity and complexity alert us to the ways in which their crimes find corrupting correlates in our own hearts. "He who looks at a woman to lust after her has already committed adultery with her in his heart." Such words of Jesus encourage not scrupulosity, but candor. Contemplating the unspeakable crimes of Stalin's gulag archipelago, Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote, "The line between good and evil runs through every human heart."

We would draw the line between ourselves and the really big-time sinners. For them the cross may be necessary. For us a forgiving wink from an understanding Deity will set things to right. But the "big time" of sinning is in every human heart. We make small our selves when we make small our sins. Fearing the judgment of great evil, we shrink from the call to great good. Like Adam, we slink away to hide in a corner. Like the prodigal son, we hunker down behind the swine's trough of our shrunken

lives. But then he came to his senses. He remembered who he was in his former life, in his real life. There is no way to have that dignity restored except through the confession of that dignity betrayed.

Still we hold back from confession, holding on to the tattered remnants of our former dignity. The more Adam hides from his shame, the more he proclaims his shame. What ludicrous figures we sinners cut. It is all so unnecessary; it only increases the complicity that we deny. We act as though there is not forgiveness enough. There is more than forgiveness enough.

Were you there when they crucified my Lord? Yes, we were there when we crucified our Lord. Recognizing the line that runs through every human heart, no longer do we try to draw the line between "them" and "us." Who can look long and honestly at the victims and the perpetrators of history's horrors and say that this has nothing to do with me? To take the most obvious instance, where would we have taken our stand that Friday afternoon? With Mary and the Beloved Disciple or with the mocking crowds? "Know thyself," the philosophers said, for this is the beginning of wisdom. "The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom," wrote the Psalmist. Knowing myself and fearing God, knowing a thousand big and little things that I have done and failed to do, I cannot deny that I was there. In ways I do not fully understand, I know that I, too, did the deed, wielded the whip, drove the nails, thrust the spear.

About chief of sinners I don't know, but what I know about sinners I know chiefly about me. We did not mean to do the deed, of course. The things we have done wrong seemed, or mostly seemed, small at the time. The word of encouragement

withheld, the touch of kindness not given, the visit not made, the trust betrayed, the cutting remark so clever and so cruel, the illicit sexual desire so generously entertained, the angry answer, the surge of resentment at being slighted, the lie we thought would do no harm. It is such a long and tedious list of little things. Surely not too much should be made of it, we thought to ourselves. But now it has come to this. It has come to the cross. All the trespasses of all the people of all time have gravitated here, to the killing grounds of Calvary.

Not only about our entanglement in the loss of each but also in the consequence of our deeds, John Donne was right: "No man is an Island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main." It was not only for our sins, but surely for our sins too. What a complex web of complicity is woven by our lives. Send not to know by whom the nails were driven; they were driven by you, by me.

Is there a perverse presumption in confessing that we did the deed? There could be, I suppose. But there is also prudence, and an irrepressible awareness of John Donne's truth about our entanglement with the whole. We pray with the Psalmist, "Who can discern his errors? Cleanse me from my secret faults." Foolishly we hold back from the admission, separating ourselves from the full burden of common deed. We do not know the measure of our trespass, whereas we know God's mercy is beyond measure. Be grateful that forgiveness is not limited to the sins that we know. "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

These, then, are the truths at the heart of atonement. First, something has gone terribly wrong. We find ourselves in a

distant country far from home. Second, whatever the measure of our guilt, we are responsible. Then, third, something must be done about it. Things must be set right. We cannot go on this way. False gospels of positive thinking or stoic exhortations to make the best of it are worse than useless—they are obscene. They are invitations to make our peace with a corruption at the core of everything. Better that Job and all the Jobs on the long mourning bench of history should curse God and die than that they should make their peace with the evil that they know. Such a peace is the peace of the dead, of those who are already spiritually and morally dead. The religious marketplace is crowded with the peddlers of peace of mind and peace of soul. But the narcotic of denial or pretense is too high a price to pay. Better to rage against the night.

Something must be done about what has gone wrong. Things must be set to right. And this brings us to the fourth great truth of atonement: Whatever it is that needs to be done, we cannot do it. Each of us individually, the entirety of the human race collectively—what can we do to make up for one innocent child tortured and killed? Never mind making up for Auschwitz, or the killing fields of Cambodia, or the coffin ships of traffickers in human slavery or the slaughter beyond number of innocents in the womb. We chatter on about modernity and progress while King Herod reigns secure. "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, for they were no more."

Rightly does Rachel refuse to be comforted. Something must be done. It started long before Rachel and her children. From far back in the mists of our beginnings, the blood of Abel has been

crying from the ground; and along the way we have allowed ourselves to be comforted by the counsel of Cain, advising us to get over it, to get on with our lives, for, after all, are we our brother's keeper? But we know we are. We don't know what to do about it, but we know that if we lose our hold on that impossible truth, we have lost everything. Something must be done. Justice must be done. Things must be set to right.

But what can *we* do? We cannot even put our own lives in order, never mind setting right a radically disordered world. The Apostle Paul declares, "I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. . . . Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" There is an answer to that question, but do not rush to the answer. Stay with the question for a time if you would understand why the derelict hangs there on the cross.

If things are to be set to right, if justice is to be done, somebody else will have to do it. It cannot be done by just anybody, as though one more death could somehow "make up for" innocent deaths beyond numbering. In that way lies the seeking out of scapegoats, the vain effort to heap our collective guilt on another, on the "other." People have been doing that from the foundation of the world. History is filled with scapegoats sacrificed to appease outraged justice.

And the Lord commanded Moses that Aaron should bring the goat before the Lord, "and Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over him all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, and all their sins; and he shall put them upon the head of the goat,

and send him away into the wilderness. . . . The goat shall bear all their iniquities upon him to a solitary land." The goat goes off to a distant country. God himself trained ancient Israel in the ritual by which justice was satisfied, but only for a time. It is a training for what was to come, and for what was to surpass it.

Through the myths of millennia, blind and stumbling humanity acts upon the unquenchable intuition that something must be done. From Canaanite altars to Aztec temples, countless thousands have been offered in blood sacrifice. In the cruel twists of mythic imagination, the scapegoat is not expelled but destroyed. In our own enlightened century a nation sought to purify itself and the world by the extermination of the Jews. Even today we witness mobs outside prison walls cheering an execution taking place inside. It is a long, terrible history of bloodlust and vengeance, all in the name of justice, all driven by the insistence—the *correct* insistence—that something must be done.

As much as we are repulsed by it, that long, terrible history bears witness to an intuition that cannot be, and should not be, repressed. Something *must* be done. Otherwise, we live in a world without moral meaning. Otherwise, forgiveness is Bonhoeffer's "cheap grace" that trivializes evil and thereby also trivializes good. Otherwise, the elder brother, the one who resented his young brother's welcome home, was right in protesting that the reconciliation with the father is cheap and easy and dishonest. Forgiveness costs—it *must* cost—or else the trespass does not matter. Is such an intuition primitive? Yes, primitive as in primordial, as in that which constitutes our moral being in the world.

If we cannot set things right, if we cannot even set ourselves, never mind the world, right—who, then, is to do it? It must be someone who is in no way responsible for what has gone wrong. It must be done by an act that is perfectly gratuitous, that is not driven by necessity, by an act that is perfectly free. The act must be by one who embodies *everything*, whose life is not one life among many, but is life itself—a life that is our life and the life of all who have ever lived and ever will live. But where is such a one to be found?

The opening words of the Gospel of John: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." The One who is life itself does this because nobody else could do it. He who is light and life plunges headlong into darkness and death and does so in perfect freedom. It is his mission, the reason he came into the world. "No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord," he said. "I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again; this charge I have received from my Father."

The Father and the Son have colluded in a thing most astonishing, a thing on the far side of our ability to be astonished. Justice cries out to be satisfied; something must be done. From the blood of Abel, to the prison camps of Siberia, to the nine-year-old who this afternoon died of leukemia, justice cries out. These things must not be permitted to have the last word.

Who is at fault? Who is guilty? From the beginning of time, the wise and the good have wrestled with these questions. The wicked all have excuses. The guards at the death camps, the husband cheating on his wife, the executive padding expense accounts, the physician giving a lethal dose of morphine in the nursing home—all have excuses. I was obeying superior orders; I have uncontrollable needs that must be satisfied; everybody does it; we must relieve the world of useless lives. Name the crime and it is fitted out with an excuse. My parents abused me; I was deprived; I was spoiled; my genes made me do it. And we are back to "Adam, where are you?" and his pathetic response, "The woman whom you gave to be with me . . . "

All the Adams and all the Eves join with the brightest and the best of philosophers to declare that this is just the way the world is. And who is responsible for that? And with that question was born what philosophers call the question of "theodicy"—how to justify to humankind the ways of God. And thus was God put on trial. If God is good and God is almighty, how did evil come about? If there is evil, how can an almighty God be good or a good God be almighty? In order to adjudicate these questions, we constituted ourselves the jury and the judge, and we put God in the dock. And soon enough we would constitute ourselves the executioner as well.

From every corner of the earth, from every scene of every crime, from north and south, from east and west, from the rich and from the poor, every mother's son and every father's daughter gathered. The jury deliberated and reached its verdict. The decision was unanimous. With one voice, poor deluded humanity pointed to the prisoner in the dock and declared, "God is guilty!"

The angels were stunned, the stars hid their light, the universe went silent at the audacity of it, the wrongness of it, the outrageousness of it. The Judge of the guilty is himself judged guilty. Here now at last, in all the thick catalogue of human rebellion, is the lie so brazen as to surely bring down upon the heads of the insurrectionists a punishment swift and terrible. But no, the prisoner standing in the dock calmly responds, "For this was I born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Every one who is of the truth hears my voice."

In perfect freedom, the Son become the goat become the Lamb of God is condemned by the lie in order to bear witness to the truth. The truth is that we are incapable of setting things right. The truth is that the more we try to set things right, the more we compound our guilt. It is not enough for God to take our part. God must take our place. All the blood of goats and lambs, all the innocent victims from the foundation of the world, all the acts of expiation and reparation, they only make things worse. They all strengthen the grip of the great lie that we can set things right. The grip of that lie is broken by the greatest of lies, "God is guilty!"

God must die. It is a lie so monstrous that to suggest it invites instant annihilation—except that God accepts the verdict. Those who know the awful truth hear his voice. And Jesus said, "Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify thy name."

But how, we must ask, is God glorified by the humiliation and death of God? This great reversal of everything we think we know is too much to bear. Dark is light and light is dark, right is

wrong and wrong is right and a lie is recruited to the service of the truth. The order of things is shattered. Precisely so, our disordered order is shattered so that things might be restored to order. And then Jesus said, "Now is the judgment of this world, now shall the ruler of this world be cast out; and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself." The ruler of this world—the lord of disorder and of disordered humanity in his thrall—passes judgment on the Judge of all. The judgment is so monstrously false that only by submitting to it can its falseness be exposed. By Christ's submitting to the judgment of the world the world is judged.

Jesus might have been merely a moral teacher pointing out the grotesque error of the judgment. Christianity would then have become a school of thought promoting his moral philosophy. Jesus came, however, to be the Lamb of God, living out and dying out this falsehood that would not die unless taken to its final conclusion. Only in this way would he be lifted up and draw all to himself, not simply as our teacher but as our Savior and our Lord. Only by submitting to our folly could he save us from our folly. The drama had to be played out all the way. St. John writes of the night before he died: "Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end."

He loved them to the end that they, too, might learn the way that is on the far side of outraged justice. That same night he told them, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if

you do what I command you." And then he prayed for his friends, "Father, I desire that they also, whom thou hast given me, may be with me where I am, to behold my glory which thou hast given me in thy love for me before the foundation of the world."

From before the foundation of the world. In the beginning was the Word. Did God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—know from the beginning that it would turn out this way? From before the foundation of the world, from before the time when there was time, did God hear humanity's fatal verdict: "God is guilty! Crucify him! Crucify him!"? And did the Son say to the Father, from the beginning, that he would go in the power of the Spirit to submit himself to the sentence of death? St. Paul suggests as much: "But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glorification. None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory."

Here we touch on mystery far beyond our ability to understand; we try to listen in on the conversation that is the very life of the triune God, the life of God that is the power and love that enables all to be. Our desire to understand is as inescapable as our failure to understand. The more we search and the deeper we go, the more we cry out with Paul: "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" Yet surely the love with which Jesus loved the Father here on earth is one with the love of the Word that was in the beginning. The perfect self-surrender of the cross is, from eternity and to eternity, at the heart of what it means to say that God is love.

In 1 John it is put this way: "Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God; for God is love." Yes, from the foundation of the world God heard the rebel verdict, "God is guilty!" And from the beginning he knew what he would do about a humanity he created free to love him, and therefore free to hate him. God subjects himself to the blasphemous lie that he is the guilty one. The rebellion did not take God by surprise. Redemption was not an improvisation, an emergency measure in response to an unexpected setback. From the beginning, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself." This is what it means to love; this is what it means to *be* love; this is what it means to say that God *is* love.

Yet it hardly seems possible that injustice could be set right by a still greater injustice, that wrong could be set right by a still greater wrong. That is what St. Paul appears to suggest, however, in the passage in which he speaks of God in Christ reconciling the world to himself: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." The language is radical: It was not simply that he bore the consequences of sin, but that he was made to *be* sin. The great reversal reverses all of our preconceptions. God must become what we are in order that we might become what God is. To effectively take our part, he must take our place.

The word "theodicy" means the judgment of God—not God judging us but our judging God. The philosophical problem of theodicy is that of trying to square God's ways with our sense of justice. This assumes that we know what justice is, but the entire story the Bible tells begins with the error of that presumption. It

is the original error of our wanting to name good and evil. Right from the start Adam tried to put God in the dock, making God responsible for the fall because, after all, God gave him the woman who tempted him to sin. From the beginning we see the argument building up to humanity's cry, "God is guilty!"—building up to the derelict nailed to the cross.

In the long history of human philosophies, the name of the game has been theodicy. Trying to square the ways of God with our understanding of justice, some have concluded that he is not good, others that he is not almighty and yet others that he is not at all. But the right question is not that of theodicy, but of what we might call "homodicy"—the judgment of humankind. The crisis is not in justifying God's ways to us, but in justifying our ways to God. "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself." It is the world that needed to be reconciled to God's justice, not God to the world's justice. It does not say, "God was in Christ reconciling himself to the world." After all, he is God and we are not; he is the Creator and we the creatures. It seems only right.

And yet. God reconciling the world to himself is also God reconciling himself to the world. In working out the plan of redemption, the Bible does not say that man became God, but that God became man. Further, he reconciled himself to the world by "not counting their trespasses against them." He forgave us not by ignoring our trespasses but by assuming our trespasses. "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." God became what by right he was not, so that we might become what by right we are not. This is what Christians

through the ages have called "the happy exchange." This exchange, this reversal, is at the very epicenter of the story of our redemption. In the Great Vigil of Easter we sing of the *felix culpa*—the "happy fault": "O happy fault, O necessary sin of Adam, which gained for us so great a Redeemer!"

In Matthew's Gospel this exchange is signaled at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry. John the Baptizer announces that Jesus is the one who "will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire." Jesus, he declares, has come to judge the world. Then we read: "Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' But Jesus answered him, 'Let it be so now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.' Then John consented." God asks our consent when he takes our part by taking our place.

Later, on the night before he was betrayed, Jesus poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet. He came to Peter and Peter said, "Lord, do you wash my feet?" Jesus answered, "What I am doing you do not know now, but afterward you will understand." Peter declared, "You shall never wash my feet." Jesus said, "If I do not wash you, you have no part in me." He will not serve us against our will.

To those who are accustomed to living in a world turned upside down, setting it right cannot help but appear to be turning it upside down. With our first parents we reached for the power to name good and evil, thinking to assert control, but thereby we lost control. With the prodigal son, we grabbed what we could and ended up impoverished and alone in a distant country. Because God is not the God of the

philosophers, because God is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, because God is love, he sent his Son to the far country to share our lot, to bear the consequences of our folly, to lead us home to the waiting Father.

Such a way of love violates our sense of justice. With John the Baptizer, we protest. But Jesus says, "Let it be so now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Note that he says, "fitting for *us* to fulfill all righteousness." He fulfills all righteousness, he does what must be done to set things right, by assuming the burden of our every human wrong. And we too have a part in fulfilling all righteousness by letting him do for us what we could not do for ourselves. On the one hand, we would not dare ask him to go to the cross. On the other, we joined in humanity's determination to acquit ourselves by condemning him to the cross. It is the necessary outcome of the verdict "God is guilty."

Those who issue a verdict so grotesque deserve to die. Justice would seem to demand it. But God made the long journey into our distant country not to destroy but to give life. John's Gospel puts it this way: "For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him"—even if salvation requires that God is the one who is condemned. God cannot agree to a verdict so manifestly unjust, but he does submit to the sentence that the verdict entails.

If we have even the slightest sense of justice, we recoil at the thought. But what else is to be done about all that has gone wrong? Is there any alternative to its being set right by a yet greater wrong? Or can that greater wrong really be wrong if it is

the judgment of God that it should be? If we say this way of atonement is wrong, we are back in the garden presuming to name right and wrong, good and evil. Love is the justice of the God who is love. To John the Baptizer and to us Jesus says, "Let it be so now." God asks for our consent. Before such a mystery of unbounded love that is bound even to die for the beloved, we offer not only our consent, but gratitude exultant. *O felix culpa!* "O happy fault! O necessary sin of Adam, which gained for us so great a Redeemer!"

Atonement. At-one-ment. What was separated by an abyss of wrong has been reconciled by the deed of perfect love. What the first Adam destroyed the second Adam has restored. "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." We knew not what we did when we reached for the right to name good and evil. We knew not what we did when we grabbed what we could and went off to a distant country. We knew not what we did when, in the madness of excusing ourselves, we declared God guilty. But today we have come to our senses. Today, here at the cross, our eyes are fixed on the dying derelict who is the Lord of life. We look at the One who is everything that we are and everything that we are not, the One who is true man and true God. In him we, God and man, are perfectly one. At-one-ment. Here, through the cross, we have come home, home to the truth about ourselves, home to the truth about what God has done about what we have done. And now we know, or begin to know, why this awful, awe-filled Friday is called good.